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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MINSK 000414

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SUBJECT: MILINKEVICH LOOKING AT LONG-TERM ROLE IN OPPOSITION

REF: MINSK 399

Classified By: Charge Jonathan Moore for reason 1.4 (d)

Summary

1. (C) One week away from the May 26-27 congress of democratic forces, it appears that current coalition leader Aleksandr Milinkevich will participate -- if half-heartedly -- in the event. Opposition coalition leaders and activists had been wondering whether Milinkevich would withdraw from the congress and the coalition when his single-leader platform was soundly defeated in the opposition regional conferences. The former presidential candidate had hinted during the regional conferences that if activists rejected his de facto bid to be re-elected coalition chairman, he could not "in good conscience" be involved in a co-chairmanship leadership structure. However, Milinkevich's closest advisors inform us that he most likely will remain "nominally" involved in the coalition. Milinkevich will probably participate in subsequent coalition meetings, but the bulk of his time will be dedicated to his moribund For Freedom civic movement. End summary.

Milinkevich Likely to Remain in Coalition...

2. (C) Since the conclusion of the opposition coalition regional conferences on May 13 (reftel), we have spoken to key Milinkevich allies and coalition leaders about Milinkevich's plans. (Note: Milinkevich has been traveling outside the country for the past week. End note.) Viktor Korniyenko, Milinkevich's deputy and close friend, told Pol/Econ Chief on May 17 that although the de facto coalition leader is disappointed with the results of the regional conferences, he will most likely encourage his supporters to participate in the May 26-27 democratic congress and remain active members within the coalition.

3. (C) Korniyenko stressed that, despite rumors to the contrary, Milinkevich is not a "spoiler." The former presidential candidate recognizes the value of the congress and the coalition. Korniyenko noted that Milinkevich's "For Freedom" faction, which is mainly comprised of non-party activists and members of the Belarusian Popular Front (BNF) and United Civic Party (UCP), will be large enough to give the movement a co-leadership role in all coalition organizational structures. Korniyenko stressed repeatedly that he would encourage Milinkevich to keep his faction united and involved in the coalition; he doubted Milinkevich would disagree.

4. (C) BNF deputy Viktor Ivashkevich also doubted that Milinkevich would withdraw from the coalition. He noted that

"now more than ever" Milinkevich needs to show the opposition that he is a team player. Ivashkevich predicted that most BNF activists, clearly Milinkevich's largest support base in the coalition, will be judging his leadership skills on his ability to propose and lead concrete activities within the coalition. Otherwise, activists will quickly reach the conclusion that Milinkevich is a political lightweight and not worth following.

...But Participation Will Be Minimal

15. (C) Milinkevich pointed out during his recent press interview with Radio Liberty and noted during the regional conferences that he would not head up a particular activity or initiative within the coalition if regional delegates opted for the co-chairmanship leadership structure. Korniyenko explained that Milinkevich remains fundamentally at odds with this concept of leadership and could not "in good conscience" actively participate in any project for which he is not solely responsible. UCP leader Anatoliy Lebedko and Ivashkevich separately told Pol/Econ Chief they were disappointed with Milinkevich's approach, but they both would prefer the de facto leader's minimal role in the coalition over no role at all. They conceded that Milinkevich's complete withdrawal would prompt some members within their parties to follow him, although they dismissed the possibility of an exodus.

Focus on For Freedom Movement

16. (C) Milinkevich is clearly looking beyond the May 26-27 congress, and has told his supporters that he will devote

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most of his energy and resources to developing his For Freedom movement. Milinkevich and his deputies recognize that this movement has not taken shape or action since the former presidential candidate first announced the initiative in March 2006. However, given the results of the regional conferences and his diminished role in the coalition, Milinkevich wants to focus his efforts on a movement that is unquestionably his own. Whereas the For Freedom faction in the coalition will comprise mainly non-party activists and sympathetic BNF and UCP members, the For Freedom movement aims to involve members of virtually all parties and civic organizations.

17. (C) Milinkevich has made it clear to party leaders that the For Freedom movement will not be competing with the coalition; rather, the nature of its work will be that of a non-governmental organization, working in parallel with the parties and for the same goals. Accordingly, Milinkevich will be convening a founding meeting with approximately 80 members on May 20 to establish a charter and begin the process to register his movement as an NGO with the Belarusian government. The key objective of the For Freedom movement remains exerting pressure on the regime through street demonstrations and an aggressive information campaign to hold new presidential elections. Ivashkevich said party leaders are not likely to block their members from taking part in Milinkevich's movement, as Milinkevich has wisely steered his movement away from a collision course with the coalition. (Note: The coalition officially accepted the For Freedom platform as part of the coalition's overall strategy. End note.)

18. (C) Some of Milinkevich's supporters among the expected delegates are already telling us that they plan to boycott the congress. BNF delegate to the congress Pavel Batuyev told Charge during his May 17 trip to Soligorsk that he was not going to participate in the event because Milinkevich's single-leader platform was rejected in the regional conferences. Charge counseled Batuyev against such a move and encouraged him to use the congress as an opportunity to

show his support for Milinkevich.

Comment

¶9. (C) We believe it is critically important for Milinkevich and his supporters to participate actively in the democratic congress and remain at least nominally involved in the coalition. (Note: Charge will reinforce this message in a meeting with Milinkevich on May 21. End note.) To be successful, Milinkevich must regain his credentials in the broader democratic opposition as a team player and coalition builder; the obvious starting point is to demonstrate firm support for the congress and encourage his supporters to do the same. Such an approach would draw even more democratic activists to his still nascent For Freedom civic movement. His movement would gain further momentum after the congress if Milinkevich shows decisive leadership.
Moore